

35th Annual Chorus America Conference

A resounding success!

Jeanne Kelly, Founder and Executive Director of Encore Creativity for Older Adults

I have heard that if you learn one new and great thing at a conference, your attendance has been worthwhile and successful. That being said, the 35th Annual Chorus America Conference in Minneapolis, Minnesota was a resounding success. Minnesota is known as the land of a thousand lakes. It also seems to be the land of a thousand choirs and hundreds of composers, all of excellent quality.

As Founder and Executive Director of Encore Creativity for Older Adults, I was invited to make a presentation, along with Jeanie Brindley-Barnett and Paul Babcock, president of MacPhail Center for Music, on the topic of 'Seniors and Singing – Two Initiatives that Make a Difference.' Brindley-Barnett coordinates the MacPhail Music for Life program and spoke about lifelong learning at eight senior living residences throughout the Twin Cities, with the choral component being especially popular. I spoke on our Encore Chorale program, which is the nation's largest choral program for older adults. My presentation was designed to show that older adult singers have a lot to offer, even after they no longer pass the audition to return to the chorus they may have sung in for many years. Singing is a lifestyle. I was certainly in the right arena to get this message across.

Chorus America and Minnesota host Philip Brunelle and his

VocalEssence organization did a superb job of gathering the very best choral directors, singers, composers and presenters to give the conference attendees an action packed, stimulating and more than fulfilling four days of learning, hearing glorious choral music, discovering new works, networking, and indulging in pure enjoyment. The pre-conference offerings included in-depth seminars in 'Effective, Satisfying and Sustainable Leadership', 'Engaging the Future for Choruses', and 'Imagine What's Possible: Fundraising Skills and Strategies'. I chose to attend the conducting masterclass where four conducting fellows conducted VocalEssence Ensemble Singers, coached by Kathy Saltzman Romey, Artistic Director of the Minnesota Chorale and director of choral activities at University of Minnesota, and Anton Armstrong, conductor of The St. Olaf Choir. It was interesting to see that the most subtle conducting changes initiated by Romey and Armstrong , as in a more sweeping horizontal arm movement, made such a huge difference in how the singers responded.



Members of Minnesota Chorale perform choreography for "Sagitta" by Mary Ellen Childs – © Anthony Kwan

The opening plenary session was led by Minnesotan and

internationally known Garrison Keillor, who held us all spellbound as we sang beloved American tunes. I have heard him countless times on his nationally broadcast Prairie Home Companion Radio Show. His ability to connect with his audience is truly awe inspiring.

Minnesota has been called the choral capitol of the United States. Philip Brunelle planned an incredible opening gala concert in Orchestra Hall by amassing nine Minnesota choirs, including 250 children of the Minnesota Youth Choir Consortium. Their electrifying performance was full of life, great tone and pure joy. To watch the smiles on their faces as they filed out of the concert hall let us know that the choral tradition will live on and on. They set the stage for an evening of extraordinary choral singing with all Minnesota composers. Quite a feat. The evening climaxed with Massed Choirs conducted by Sigrid Johnson performing the world premiere of *When Music Sounds* by Stephen Paulus. The poem by Walter de la Mare Music begins 'When music sounds, gone is the earth I know, / And all her lovely things even lovelier grow'. The text was perfect for the conference and the beauty of sound and poetry permeated all our souls and minds.

Plenary speaker Marilyn Carlson Nelson, Chairman of Carlson, and a true lover and supporter of choral music, spoke on the fact that how we lead and how we raise our voices is becoming more important, given the dismal financial climate in the arts. She quoted Baba Dioum: "In the end, we will conserve only what we love, we will love only what we understand and we will understand only what we are taught." This was so appropriate as we all strive to connect to our choral audiences and bring them into our world, ensuring large and appreciative audiences.

Conference sessions included every aspect to build a successful and sustainable choral program. Tim Brunelle spoke about the need for choral organizations to be as savvy in their ads as major corporations. Great ads drive everything

from recruitment to ticket sales to building your loyal followers.

'Cantare! – Increasing Awareness Through Choral Music' reported on the innovative community outreach program called 'Cantare!', which places Mexican composers in Minnesota classrooms to serve as composers-in-residence. This brainchild was conceived by VocalEssence in 2008 and since has reached over 5000 children. A session on keeping our singing vocal apparatus and conductor bodies healthy was addressed. 'Strategy and Planning to Ensure Your Chorus will Thrive' drove home three points: face reality, find meaning and improvise. There were sessions on strengthening boards, confronting bullying through music, hidden gems of choral riches – I could go on and on. There was so much great information to partake of and it was difficult to make a choice. They were all compelling to the choral world.

The Conference offered 'Dine Arounds' offering attendees to network, 'Conductor-Composer Speed Dating' bringing innovative ideas together, and 'Buttonhole Consultations' which offered 20 minute, one-on-one sessions between experienced choral conductors and attendees.

I attended the dinner and dialog with Libby Larsen that formed part of the American Composers Forum ChoralConnections conference. She is one of the founders of the American Composer Forum and reported that with searching for texts and reading, lots of travel and attending concerts and rehearsals, and researching huge changes in technology, it is amazing that composers ever found time to compose. She eloquently stated "Music is the way I know best how to communicate what it means to be alive."

Thursday evening's concert of *The World Beloved: A Bluegrass Mass* by Carol Barnett was an evening many of us will remember for a long time. Philip Brunelle and his VocalEssence Ensemble Singers and Monroe Crossing performed magnificently

in the grandeur of Central Lutheran Church. Before the Mass, we heard Dominick Argento's hauntingly beautiful *Walden Pond*, with Argento himself in the audience. The VocalEssence sound is sheer, focused beauty and blend. And it is quite unique to hear such a highly musical bluegrass band. This collaboration could not have been better. All the conference attendees were given a CD of the Mass and I do believe I will wear mine out.

Chorus America and Philip Brunelle and his VocalEssence gave us a conference that will be hard to top. We all came away with a treasure load of ideas to keep the choral tradition alive and well. Thank you Chorus America and VocalEssence for a superb four days!